

Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Pattern Shop
(Building No. 53)
Near State Highway 37
Vallejo
Solano County
California

HAER No. CA-3-B

HAER,
CAL,
48-MARI,
1-G-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107

HAER,
CAL,
48-MARI,
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Location: Southwest of and across Mare Island strait from the city of Vallejo, Solano County, California, and 1.5 miles Southeast of State Highway 37, where it bridges the Napa River.
UTM: 0564100-4217000
Quad: Mare Island

Date of Construction: 1854-1855

Present Owner: United States Navy
Mare Island Naval Shipyard
Vallejo, California 94592

Present Use: Naval Shipyard

Significance: Mare Island was established by Commander (later Admiral) David Glasgow Farragut as the first Naval base in California. Building No. 53 was a prime example of an industrial building constructed by the U.S. Navy in the 19th Century.

History

(For a general history of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, see HAER No. CA-3)

The exact date of construction of Building No. 53 is not known. Property Record Cards maintained by the Navy date this building between 1854 and 1857. This building was constructed on native soil which is generally a sandy-silt underlain by sandstone and siltstone rock, and were located on a relatively flat area bordering Mare Island Strait and located at the base of a hill.

This structure was built under the direction of Abraham Powell, Jr., Master Carpenter and Joiner, and Mr. Warner, Master Mason, of brick from a tile works in Contra Costa County, California. The structure was two stories high, 400 feet long, and 65 feet wide. The building was built with solid timber trusses spanning the brick side walls with 1 - 1/8 inch straight sheathing supporting a slate roof. The slate tiles were brought to Mare Island from New Bedford, Connecticut, or Boston, Massachusetts. There is a mezzanine floor, which was built later, between the first and second floors in the east half of the building. The truss design can be seen in enclosure 1. Brick cornices supported the gutters, which were rectangular copper conduits which served to collect rainwater to augment the water supply. The area between

buildings 51 and 53 contained one of the original 22 cisterns which stored the collected potable water.

Building 53 housed a variety of shipyard shop and administrative functions through its 121 year history. A shipyard master plan developed in 1863 lists Building 53 as a timber shed with a carpenter shop on the second floor.

The second floor contained the Mold Loft on which the lines of such ships as the PROMETHEUS, JUPITER, CUYAMA, KANAWHA, MAUMEE, SHAW, and CALIFORNIA were laid down. The lower floor in earlier days was also part of the Shipfitters' Shop. In later years, the building was used as office space for the Shipyard Planning Department and Waterfront Production Shops. In World War I, the Mold Loft was moved and the Flag Loft took over the working spaces. For over 30 years the Flag Loft occupied these spaces and over 200 Flagmakers worked in this area performing all of the work required on signal flags, international flags, and of course, the National Emblem. During World War II, Building 53 was used for the manufacture of such beautiful flags as the Presidential Flag, and the intricate tree, snake and animal designs on flags of Latin America and certain Asian countries.

Building 53 also housed the bell which signaled start and stop work times for the workmen on Mare Island. The bell was made of heavy steel in England in 1860 and was located in the belfry of Building 55. After the belfry was removed, the bell was left in the attic and was forgotten until some time in 1943, when it was discovered during a roof inspection. With the help of a locomotive crane, the bell was lifted out and was restored by the Apprentice Class and was later mounted in front of the school. This bell was used from about 1855 until about 1910 when the Central Power Plant was built and the whistle replaced the bell.

This building was used until late 1978 in support of the Shipyard's mission, and has seen the construction of 513 naval crafts. These crafts span the range from sailing vessels through coal and oil-burning ships all the way to the nuclear powered vessels of today.

Sources:

- 1) Lott, Arnold S., A Long Line of Ships, Annapolis, 1954.
- 2) Lemmon, Sue & Witchels, E.D., Sidewheelers to Nuclear Power, Annapolis, 1977.
- 3) Wichels, E.D., Draft history of Buildings 51, 53, & 55, 1978.
- 4) Grapevine Articles, various dates.

